

Sorry, Admiral, We've Got To Hold

by Lt. Tim McDougall

AMH1 Edgar Woods



We were returning to Offutt AFB, flying a typical February weather divert in support of the Airborne Command Post mission. This mission involves flying a 14-member Navy crew and an eight-person joint-service battle staff, including one flag officer (critical element number 1). Critical element number 2 was the fact that Offutt has only one runway. In February, when runway conditions range from wet to icy, the E-6 can't land with a large crosswind.

We arrived in the vicinity of the field at 1100 local time. The RCR was 8, and crosswinds were 10 to 20 knots, well outside our limit. Our Dash-1 weather brief said the RCR would remain at 8, but that the crosswind would diminish and be within limits by 1300 local. The controller told us to stay in the area and try to land by 1400; otherwise, we would have to divert to Tinker for fuel and return.

The flag officer flying with us had a plane to catch for another meeting in a couple of hours. Can you guess where this is going? As he strapped into the jump seat to get a better view, ATIS called RCR at 12 and winds within limits. We started the ILS approach to runway 30. Everyone was happy until short final when the tower called winds out of limits. We went around for another try.

After the second go-round, the flag—a non-aviator—asked me if tower knew our crosswind limits. I replied I didn't want to

tell tower our limits because I didn't want to pressure the controllers into giving me a more favorable reading if it wasn't actually there.

"Does that mean 'no'?" he snapped.

"No, sir," I said.

We climbed out and delayed in the area. I apologized for the delay, but the crosswinds were out of limits. The admiral didn't respond and quickly left the flight deck.

After a short wait, Metro called the runway dry, and we headed back for another try. We landed, and the admiral left as soon as engines 1 and 2 were shut down. I don't know if he made his commercial flight—it would have been close.

We discussed the situation at the debrief, and we all felt that the flag officer was not simply asking if tower knew our crosswind limits for the controller's general knowledge. While we were never directed to do anything unsafe, the perceived pressure was real and could have easily contributed to our making a bad decision. The weather improved enough for us to land.

I don't know what the admiral would have done if conditions had not gotten better. Officers with stars on their shoulders have hectic schedules that are important, but not important enough to risk aircraft and crew. NATOPS provides limits for a reason. As an aircraft commander, stick to your guns when it comes to safety of flight. Although our admiral wasn't happy about the delay, I hope he appreciated the reason.

Lt. McDougall flies with VQ-3

